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ABSTRACT

This booklet focuses on the roles of student activities and student activity advisers within the school. It opens with definitions and characteristics of at-risk students and details some program guidelines for these students. Trying to make at-risk students feel connected to the world of work or the world of school is the book's central theme. In addition, there is an attempt to analyze the school setting and to offer information on how schools contribute to the at-risk label. Educators, they claim, need to identify their particular dropout population characteristics and think positively about outcomes--by valuing and connecting their students to the school, they may lessen dropout rates. Student activities are described as one way for students to become involved with their school and thus become more successful. Activity advisers are portrayed here as essential in keeping students involved. The booklet closes with a number of tips for involving at-risk students. Student activities must strive for success with students at risk and in doing so, students may develop their potential. (RJM)

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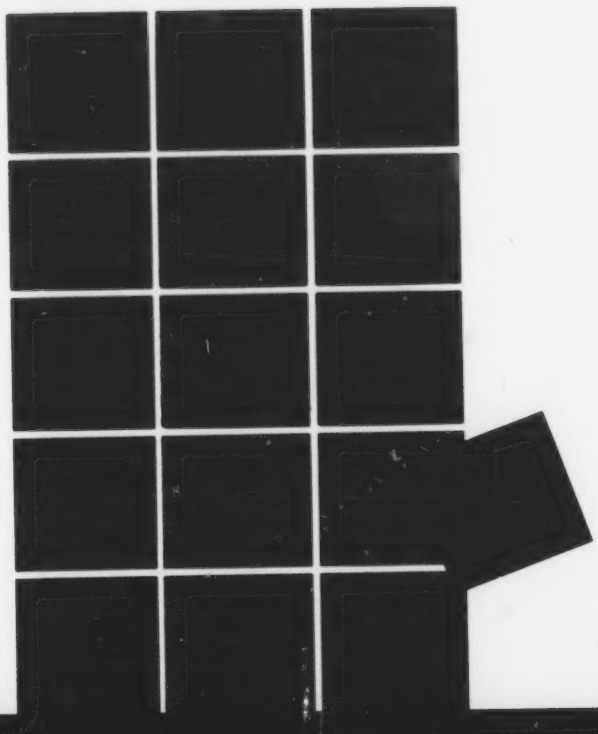
STUDENT ACTIVITIES FOR Students at Risk

by:
Edward J. Kleese / Jan A. D'Onofrio



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"Every child can learn. That so many students fail to attain necessary skills reflects not the incapacity of students but the incapacity of schools to meet the needs of every child."

(Slavin and Madden, 1989)

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AUTHORS' NOTE

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PREFACE

Research abounds on the problem of youth who are at risk. It is a problem of great magnitude that affects every segment of society. Statistics record the fate of at-risk youth and the consequences of non-intervention. Schools nationwide are addressing this problem with varying degrees of success. Existing programs include those that promote collaboration with community agencies, businesses, government agencies, and parents. Schools have modified their learning environments, allowing more self-paced study and lower teacher-student ratios. Peer tutoring and mentoring programs have been developed to provide at-risk students with positive role models and a chance for close relationships within the school. Vocationally related concerns are addressed through some at-risk programs as well as work study programs that allow students more "hands on" experience in certain vocational fields. There are some success stories, but there is also the belief that the at-risk student is not being served by our schools and we are losing that population to the increasing number of dropouts who leave school each year.

This monograph will address this complex problem by focusing on the role of student activities and student activity advisers within the school. Student activity advisers have an opportunity to contribute to the solutions needed to help their at-risk students become contributing members of their school and, ultimately, society. As Wahlage states in his 1988 Phi Delta Kappa survey, "The jocks at school must somehow become acquainted with the Hutters," (Barr, 1987). (See Chapter 2) In other words, the successful student and the school programs that support that successful student must somehow connect with the defeated learner—the marginal student, the student on the fringe, the at-risk student. There must be a bridge between the successful student and the at-risk student.

Student activities can be that bridge. The role of student activities must be to encourage inclusion of all students. Research clearly reveals that one of the key elements in a student's disengagement from the educational process is a feeling of alienation from the school.

The following pages will help you answer these questions: Who is the at-risk student? Why does the school have a responsibility to intervene? How can you as the student activity adviser play an important role in helping the at-risk student?

You can start building the bridge that will enable the at-risk student to cross over to a place where he or she can learn pro-social behavior, a new level of self-esteem, a feeling of adequacy and belonging, and a place where innovative solutions are found to problems.

Human Existence Continuum

AT RISK

BAD	GOOD
Illness	Health
Maladjustment	Adjustment
Inadequacy	Adequacy
Unhappiness	Happiness
Low Achievement	High Achievement
Low Self-Esteem	High Self-Esteem
Antisocial or Death-oriented Behavior	Prosocial or Life-oriented Behavior

Dreikurs, 1990

1 Who Is the At-Risk Student?

The term "at-risk" is used in many different ways for many different purposes. We see it with increasing frequency in journals, newspapers, speeches, and magazines. In 1987, for example, an issue of *Education Week* used the term many different times in five different articles (Richardson and Colfer, 1990). To be a youth at risk could mean a young person who is chemically dependent, a runaway, suicidal, pregnant, economically disadvantaged, a minority, or a school dropout. The definition of at-riskness is not only important to educators but also to economists, social scientists, and our legal system. Research reveals that the consequences of at-riskness affect more than just the educational system. Our judicial, economic, and social systems are equally affected resulting in problems that carry over from one system to the others. "Those who lack the basic skills, career skills, and social skills to be successful in the workplace will likely encounter unemployment, welfare, and incarceration in this nations' jails and prisons." (Martin, 1987). According to the Business Advisory Commission of the Educational Commission of the States, the concept of "at-riskness" is extended to one of not making successful transitions to productive adult lives (Gabriel and Anderson, 1987).

At-Risk Concepts

The at-risk student is well-defined as one whose potential is not nurtured by their educational experiences (Research for Better Schools, 1991). As stated above, the term "at-risk" has many different meanings. When applied to students two concepts are used. The first is the predictive concept that considers background and social and emotional characteristics to identify students who are at-

risk of becoming at-risk. This approach attempts to identify problems *before* they occur.

Indicators may be low socioeconomic status, a low level of educational attainment of either parent, a single parent household, minority status, or an individual predisposition such as being handicapped (See Chart 1) (Self, 1985). Family at-risk status is further explored in the *ERS Bulletin* of May 1991 which addresses the concept of at-risk families contributing to the at-riskness of the student (Researching At-Risk Families, 1991). The bulletin further explains that barriers and misunderstandings may exist between the parents of at-risk students and the school. Many of these parents experience feelings of inadequacy, poor self-worth, and have had bad experiences as students themselves.

The second concept used in defining the at-risk student is one that identifies them on the basis of problematic behaviors exhibited in school: low grades, grade retention, truancy, non-participation in cocurricular activities, and disruptive behavior (See Chart 1). This approach *waits* until school-related problems occur and then identifies students exhibiting such at-risk behavior (Richardson and Colfer, 1990).

Although these characteristics, as seen in Chart 1, seem to define the typical at-risk student, other research advises us to "take care" in classifying the at-risk student. A study done by the U.S. Office of Research and Improvement, for example, challenges two commonly supported conclusions: 1) that the lower the socioeconomic status the more likely the individual will be classified at-risk; 2) that the lower the educational attainment of either parent, the more likely that the child will be classified at-risk. This study found that one condition contributing to at-risk status was the lack of supervision after school. However, the chances of no one being home when a child returns from school increases as does the family income.

In addition to this finding, the study indicated that the highest percentages of unsupervised children came from those groups of parents with higher levels of education. In conclusion, higher socioeconomic status instead of lower socioeconomic status and higher educational attainment levels of parents instead of lower educational attainment levels contributed to the at-risk status of those children studied.

CHART I.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

	Schreiber, 1979	Sewell, Palmo, Manni, 1981	Hewitt & Johnson, 1979	Durken, 1981	Curtis, 1983	Beacham, 1980	Rumberger, 1981	Massey & Crosby, 1982	Martin, 1981	Thornbury, 1975	Irvine, 1979	Total
Poor academics	X	X	X	X	X			X				6
Low parental education	X		X	X		X	X		X			6
Dislikes school	X		X	X					X	X	X	6
High grade retention	X	X		X	X				X			5
Less participation in cocurricular	X		X	X		X			X			5
Discipline problems	X			X	X			X	X			5
Broken homes (physical & emotional)	X			X			X	X	X			5
Low family socioeconomic level	X		X	X			X		X			5
Age: typically 15, 16, & 17	X		X	X		X						4
Grades: primarily 9, 10, 11	X		X	X		X						4
Poor self-concept	X	X		X			X					4
Poor reading ability	X			X					X			3
Inadequate goals and low aspirations	X	X		X								3
Non-Black (White & Hispanic)						X		X		X		3
Dislikes teachers	X									X		2
No involvement in community organizations			X							X		2
High absenteeism				X						X		2
Middle child						X				X		2
Siblings who have dropped out						X				X		2

(Self, 1985)

According to Richardson and Colfer (1990), predicting and describing students who will fall into the categories of being at-risk are not absolute. Life experiences cause a child to be at-risk, a condition that varies and changes rapidly. In school the condition is quite fluid; a student can be at-risk at one time and not at another, and in one class but not in another. The designation of at-riskness within a school relies on the nature of the student body within that school and the goals, aspirations, and instructional programs judged by the teachers to be important. Those students who do not conform to the school's particular goals and aspirations are therefore deemed at-risk. No one at-risk student is typical, nor should he or she be treated as such; each has a particular set of characteristics and circumstances that interact in a unique way with the particular school setting. Effective strategies combine research-supported predictive and descriptive data with the uniqueness of their particular school and the special needs of the population within that school.

Effective Programs

Research and practice tell us that effective programs addressing the at-risk population usually are organized around these seven elements.

1. *Planning*—careful planning in the following areas:
   - ▶ early identification of at-risk students
   - ▶ active involvement of staff appropriately responding to the unique needs of these students
   - ▶ district level planning to consider why students are rejecting school
   - ▶ specific dropout prevention plans in each school
   - ▶ collaboration with various agencies and parents in addressing the problem.
2. *Collaboration*—Emphasis must be placed on the linkage between schools, parents, community agencies, businesses, and institutions of higher education.
3. *Parental Involvement*—Parental involvement can teach parents to be better educators and role models.
4. *School Climate*—Schools must focus more on ways to make school a more caring, supportive, and nurturing place.

5. *Staff Development*—Research indicates success in addressing the at-risk problem is highly related to the quality of school staff members.
6. *Counseling*—The school counselor must have a central role in identifying at-risk students, providing short-term counseling, and referring students to support services in and out of the school.
7. *Attendance*—A key element in any at-risk program is improved attendance. The attractiveness and perceived relevance of school can be improved by assertive attendance programs.

Why the Pressing Need?

Consider these statistics: (NASSP, 1988)

- Twenty-one million children today are considered at-risk of failing in school and failing to become productive members of our society. These children feel powerless and alienated. Their future is bleak.
- Economic hardship is almost certain in an increasingly technological economy where literacy and other basic skills are critical.
- School failure will drain the national economy through welfare and social service costs and seriously hamper the nation's ability to compete internationally (NSBA, 1989).

In the recent wave of educational reform calling for higher standards and more requirements for high school graduates, the needs of at-risk students have been ignored and the dropout problem has been excaberated (ERS, 1988).

In the future, school noncompleters will have trouble finding even low wage, low skill jobs. Two factors will likely inhibit their obtaining future employment:

1. Low skill jobs are expected to account for a decreasing share of the total jobs that become available in the economy of the future.
2. For the openings that do arise in low skill jobs, young people who do not have a high school education are likely to face growing competition from their peers who have more schooling (Martin, 1987).

Children at-risk in the educational system lack a sense of connectedness to the world of school or work (Docktor, 1990). In the

1985–86 school year, 692,000 American teenagers dropped out of school, an average of 3,789 a day (ERS, 1988).

There are countless statistics that cite the consequences of not dealing with the at-risk population. Responsibility lies with our social system, our judicial system, and our government system as well as the educational system. What responsibility does the school have?

2 The School: Cause and Cure

The at-risk student brings a certain amount of at-riskness to school, but is the school a contributing factor in determining the at-risk status? According to Phelan (1987), there are school-induced factors that operate as intervening variables that can lessen or intensify an individual's predisposition to drop out before high school graduation. These factors are noted by others as well. According to Buchanan, Schultz, and Milazz the pace of instruction makes achievement difficult for some students (in Slavin and Madden, 1989). Some students receive little or no help in making transitions from grade to grade or topic to topic. For many at-risk students, "day after day the student is forced to attend a school which destroys his concept of self-worth, instills feelings of insecurity and frustration, and reinforces the idea that he is unable to learn" (Barr, 1987).

According to Chart 1, of the top eight characteristics associated with at-risk students, (cited by five of six sources) five are school-related: poor academics, dislike of school, high grade retention, low participation in cocurricular activities, and discipline problems (Self, 1985). Although the degree of the role of the school is debated, we can safely conclude that the school is a contributing factor in the at-riskness of the student. According to Wheelock (1986), while schools cannot change the social or economic backgrounds of students, they do have choices regarding the official responses to school-based factors associated with dropping out.

Ross (1983) presents a profile of an at-risk student, listing these characteristics:

1. a record of truancy or excessive absences
2. low level of identification with or participation in school activities
3. low or failing grades in two or more academic classes
4. difficulty in communicating with teachers and other students.

How Do At-Risk Students View the School?

These characteristics are noted by those students:

- feelings of not belonging
- being a loner
- rejection of school and self
- insecure in school status
- feeling that they have less respect than other students
- feel teachers are not interested in them
- low self-esteem
- little desire for self-growth/improvement

Finally, when success in school no longer seems likely, removing oneself from the setting seems reasonably compelling (Self, 1985).

Putting the observable characteristics noted by Ross next to the emotional precursors of these noted behaviors, a connection becomes apparent.

Most defeated learners see school as a threatening place, are intimidated by and distrustful of adults, and avoid school if at all possible. School intensifies their feelings of low self-esteem, is seen as a fragmented and impersonal organization with commitments aimed at the successful students and presented under the fiction that they will benefit all students. These students do not indicate they don't want to learn—defeated learners want to learn. Their hostility is not to learning, but to the organization and delivery of learning activities (Conrath, 1986).

An example of the gap between the successful student/school and the at-risk student is highlighted in a study published by Phi Delta Kappa (Barr, 1987). Gary Wahlage, the author of the study, asked what it was about school experiences that caused these students to resist and reject an institution that claims to serve them? The group of students studied were mainly freshmen and sophomores and were classified into two groups. The first group includes the marginal students who are called the Hutters, named after a coffee shop where they hang out. The other group includes successful students who are involved in athletics and other school groups. They are called the jocks.

At-Risk Students Feel: (Self, 1985)	*These Characteristics Are Observed in At-Risk Students:* (Ross, 1983)
1. THEY DON'T BELONG	▶ Record of truancy or excessive absences ▶ Low level of identification with or participation in school activities
2. LIKE LONERS	▶ Low level of identification with or participation in school activities ▶ Difficulty in communicating with teachers and other students
3. LIKE REJECTING SCHOOL AND SELF	▶ Record of truancy or excessive absences ▶ Low level of identification with or participation in school activities ▶ Low or failing grades
4. INSECURE IN SCHOOL STATUS	▶ Difficulty in communicating with teachers and other students
5. THEY ARE GRANTED LESS RESPECT (than other peers)	▶ Difficulty in communicating with teachers and other students ▶ Low level of identification with or participation in school activities
6. THEIR TEACHERS DON'T CARE	▶ Record of truancy or excessive absences ▶ Low or failing grades
7. THEY ARE NOT WORTH MUCH	▶ Difficulty in communicating with teachers and other students
8. LITTLE DESIRE TO GROW OR RISK	▶ Low level of identification with or participation in school activities
9. LIKE GIVING UP	▶ Low or failing grades

The study describes the separation between the groups, pointing out how significant this separation is to the alienation of the marginal student from the school. According to the Hutters, not only are they treated differently by their peers, who ignore them or hassle them, they are treated differently by their teachers as well. The teachers and other school personnel are perceived as not caring. As

quoted by a Hutter in this study, "The school doesn't care about you as a person. I mean if you want to come to school, fine. If you don't, then don't hang around." There is no sense of belonging to the school for the Hutters (Barr, 1987). This alienation is reinforced on a daily basis. The word "caring" is a prominent one in both the Hutters' perception of the adults in school and the adults' perception of the Hutters. The Hutters are labeled "a don't care about school group," and the adults are labeled "a don't care for these students group."

"I don't care because you don't care." Who stopped caring first?

On the other hand, the jocks feel school is a place to demonstrate and experience success. It is self-reinforcing and self-generating. Naturally, an environment that provides and enables success is honored and appreciated by those successful in it. In contrast to the Hutters' experience, the jocks describe the adults as caring. The jocks are labeled as a "I care about school" group, and the adults are labeled as a "caring about these students group."

"I care because you care."

The value of this study by Wahlage is that it provides a concrete sense of the frustration and alienation these marginal students experience. Eventually, a vicious cycle of mutual lack of respect, caring, and commitment develops between the marginal student and the successful student and those on his side—school personnel. Tragically, in other interviews with actual dropouts, Wahlage notes a substantial majority of these young adults feel a sense of missed opportunity as a result of rejecting and feeling rejected by the school (Barr, 1987). Wahlage is also quoted in an article by Wheelock (1986) as stating, "The process of becoming a dropout is complex because the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to society as the school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person." Wheelock also states that it is not the student's background that determines the student's success in school, but the school's response to the student's background that determines the student's success.

Wheelock's At-Risk Merry-Go-Round (see Figure 1) clearly shows why the at-risk student gives up. She explains that the negative school experiences for marginal students are mutually reinforcing; one negative school experience leads to another. As these

experiences accumulate, students increasingly come to believe that school is not for them. Finally, the combination of concrete problems and the students' perceptions about themselves and their lack of potential for success at school results in dropping out.

According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1990), schools must improve their holding power.

As noted in the preface, schools are working to improve their holding power. Research indicates that the many diverse at-risk programs in existence have common beliefs. Some of these beliefs are:

1. A better teacher-student ratio is needed.
2. Alternative strategies (choices) for learning, not alternatives to learning, are needed (Bass, 1991).
3. Collaboration with the entire community for resources is necessary.
4. Early intervention is important.
5. Parental support and involvement are needed for school success.
6. Flexibility within the existing program is important for participation.
7. Cooperative learning experiences are needed so at-risk students learn positive social behavior, how to take risks, and how to express their feelings appropriately.
8. Staff inservice is important to teach communication skills, group process, problem-solving skills, and learning styles so all students can be effective learners.
9. Schools MUST:
   - have a positive learning environment
   - have high expectations for all students
   - recognize the unique abilities of all students
   - develop the strengths of all students
   - understand that they have the responsibility for all students being successful
   - prevent students from becoming anonymous and invisible (nobody should get lost in the shuffle!)
   - believe that the youth at-risk problem is solvable.
10. At-risk students MUST:
    - develop an ownership of the school and have a commitment

to its purpose—see the relevance of school in their lives now and for the future
- ▸ have a strong relationship with at least one adult who is accessible and is responsive to the student's needs—someone who is seen as trustworthy and responsible
- ▸ develop a positive self-concept
- ▸ be "connected" to the school and its programs.

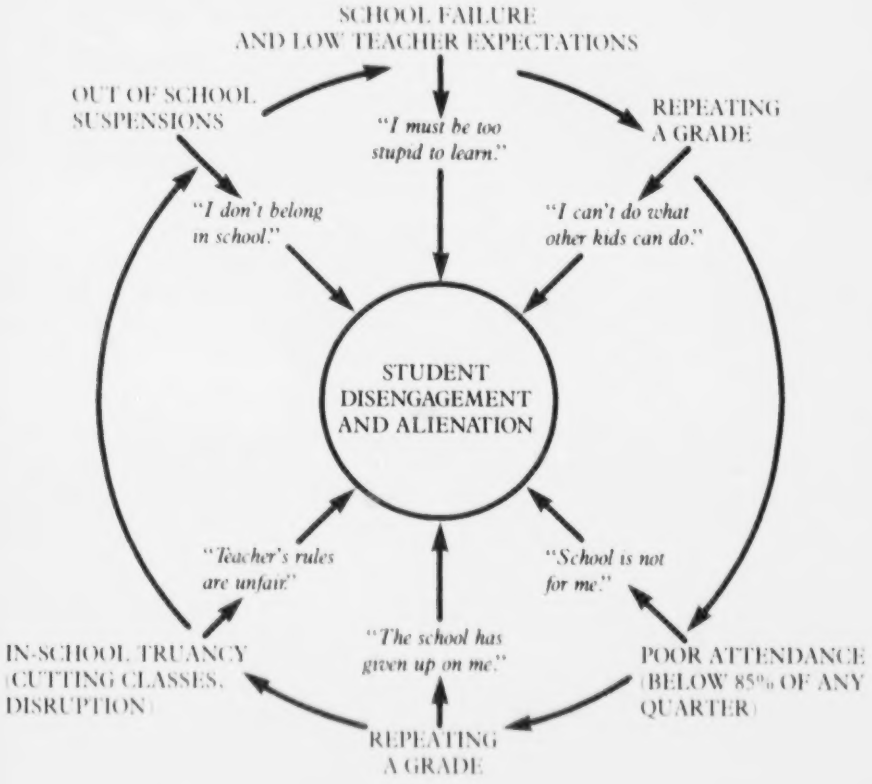
11. At-risk students NEED:
    - ▸ attention
    - ▸ acceptance
    - ▸ approval
    - ▸ affection.

At-risk students are capable and would prefer to be shown their possibilities rather than their limitations (DeBlois, 1989).

It's a solvable problem—the literature is unanimous in identifying the keys to dropout prevention. Educators need to think positively and act accordingly with vision. Schools must identify their particular dropout population characteristics. Staff members must look seriously at their district's management information system and use its resources to gather as many examples of solutions for their particular problem as they are willing to consider. Pick those solutions to which you can personally commit yourself (Bass, 1991).

FIGURE 1.

The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round



3 Student Activities— A Committed Solution

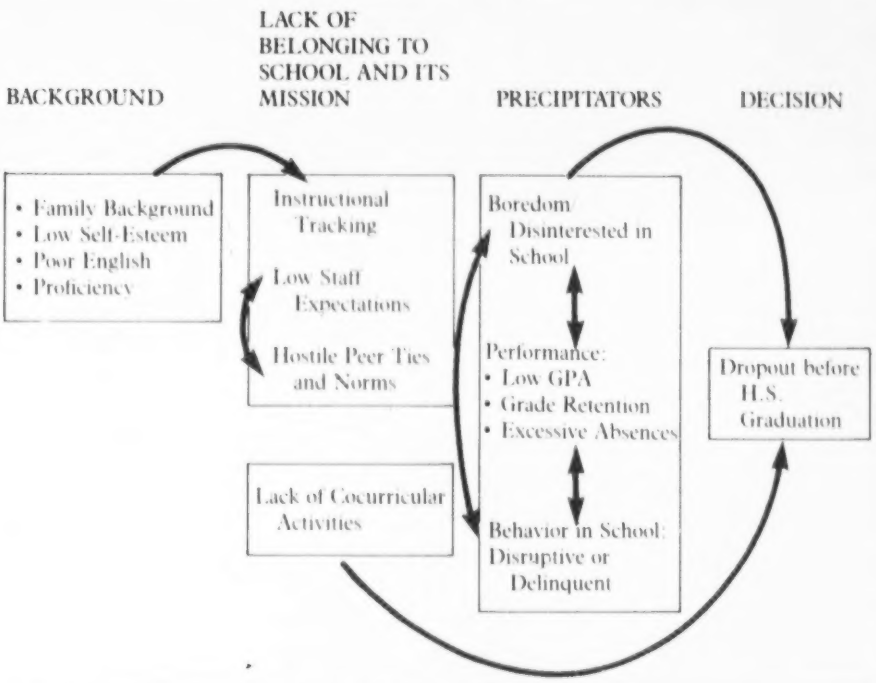
According to Biernat and Klesse (1989), there is a definite link between cocurricular participation and high school success. In the monograph *The Third Curriculum: Student Activities*, studies are cited that show a definite link between cocurricular participation and high school success. Studies consistently show that students who leave school prior to graduation are unlikely to participate in student activities. Further, research also shows low levels of participation in student activities are a characteristic of the at-risk student (Chart 1). Hewitt and Johnson have completed a longitudinal study in Middletown, America concerning dropouts and student activities. Over the course of their last four surveys, they found that 61 percent of the dropouts were not involved in any cocurricular school activities (Self, 1985).

Figure 1, "Potential Causes and Correlates of Dropping Out," places a lack of cocurricular activities with a lack of belonging to the school and its mission (Phelan, 1987). This results in the sense of student alienation that leads to dropping out before high school graduation. Students who do not have a feeling of belonging to the school are less likely to participate in activities associated with the school. There is little to attract or bind individuals to school. The lack of cocurricular activities is an additional "loosening" factor.

The resulting sense of alienation is what leads to the students' disengagement from the school. Calabrese (1989) describes alienation as a sense of not belonging, a separation of the individual from the immediate environment. Alienation is normal to a degree and can be a source of motivation to change one's environment. Alienation becomes a problem, however, when the gulf between the individual and various social units widens to the point where the individual establishes his or her own set of rules, seeks meaning in

FIGURE 1.

Potential Causes and Correlates of Dropping Out



(Phelan, 1987)

temporary pleasures, rebels in a violent form, or passively withdraws. The at-risk population has an unacceptable level of alienation.

Phelan (1987) concurs with the belief that if students feel a void in their relationships within the school, then these students will turn to peer friendships and other interests to fill this void. Because at-risk students do not "belong" to the school, they develop their own norms and activities. Phelan states that social bonds to the school and its mission are necessary for successful performance. Cocurricular activities are an alternative vehicle to attract student support

for at least the social amenities of attending school. Yet at-risk students are rarely involved with cocurricular activities.

Not all young people will make the passage through adolescence successfully under current conditions. Millions of them will never reach their full potential. Basic human needs—caring relationships with adults, guidance in facing sometimes overwhelming biological and physiological changes, and the security of belonging to constructive peer groups—are unmet at this critical stage of life. This statement is in agreement with Glasser's belief that all human behavior results from the individual's attempts to satisfy the five basic needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Glasser stresses that at-risk students do not have positive pictures of school or learning, and until they do they will not feel a sense of connectedness to the school. Therefore, we must structure the school environment so that students' basic needs are met (Greene and Uroff, 1989).

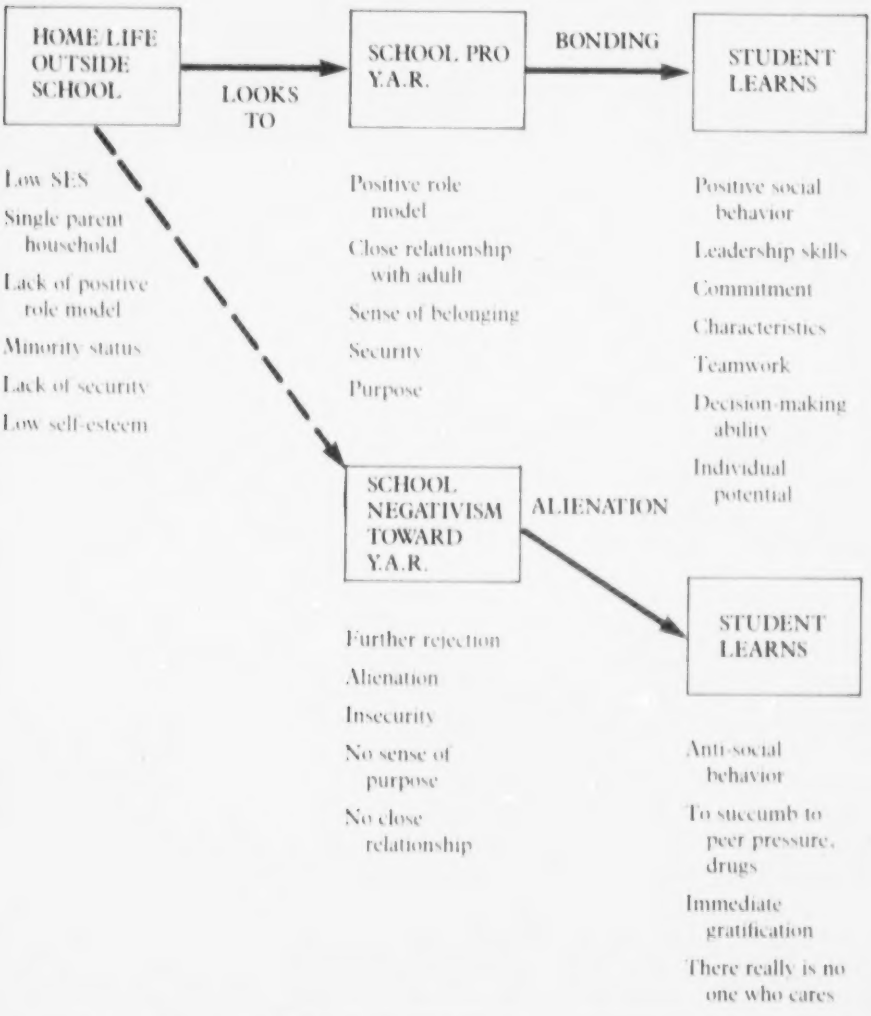
Many at-risk students do not have the support outside school to meet their basic needs. Their home is unstable possibly due to low socioeconomic status, or a single parent household, or conditions within the household such as unemployment, abuse, or alcoholism. Positive role models are often unavailable and life is a constantly challenging experience, void of security or fun. One report states that the at-risk student often looks to the school for guidance, help, and, in essence, for the fulfillment of his or her basic needs (Self, 1985). (See Figure 2.)

Student activities can be a change agent within the school to decrease the sense of alienation at-risk students feel. Calabrese (1989) describes solutions to the problem of unacceptable levels of alienation felt by the at-risk student. One of the solutions he suggests is the concept of bonding. Bonding is the process of uniting one person or group with another. He believes the school must encourage bonding and in a sense become responsible for each of its constituencies. If some adolescents (at-risk students) are not encouraged to engage in healthy, meaningful activities with other adolescents, their sense of bonding is with music, drugs, alcohol, and other activities outside the realm of legitimate student activities.

The Third Curriculum: Student Activities presents a number of research findings that support the idea that participation in cocur-

FIGURE 2.

***Path of an At-Risk Student—Youth at Risk* (Y.A.R.)**



(Self, 1985)

ricular activities enhances a student's chances for success. By participating in school activities, the process of bonding brings about a number of significant positive outcomes. The outcomes are skills learned such as lessons in leadership, fellowship, character building, teamwork, decision making, self-worth, and individual potential (Biernat and Klesse, 1989).

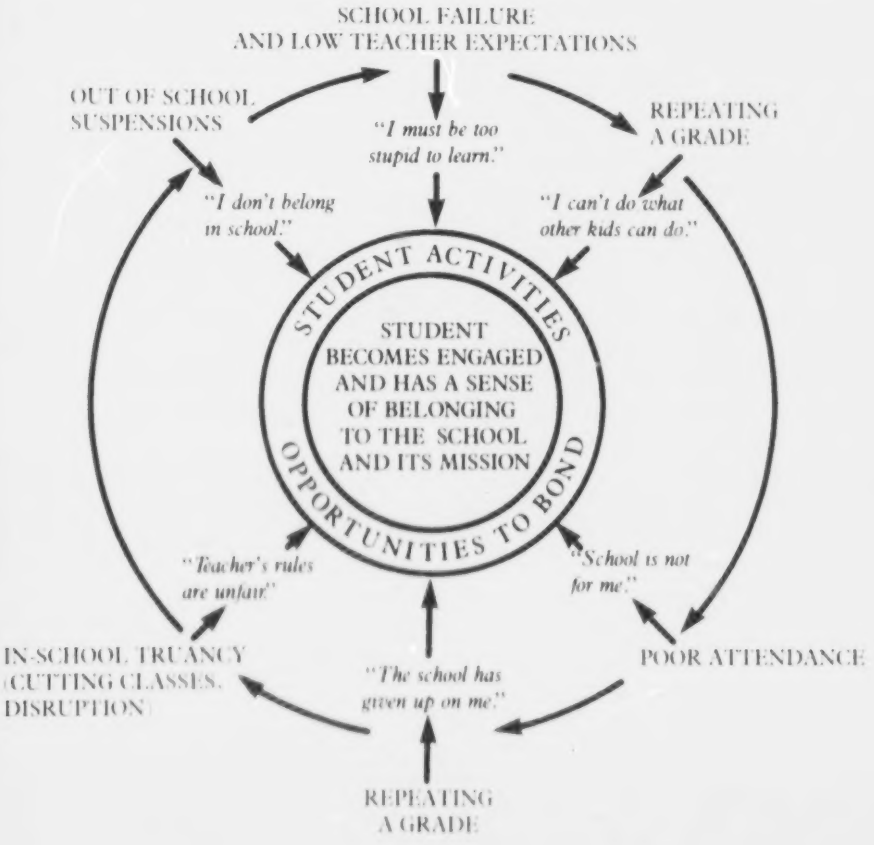
Statistics support the finding that students who participate in cocurricular activities generally have better grade point averages and attendance records than non-participants. The correlation between cocurricular activities and success was significant in a study of 21 small high schools in northwestern Ohio. The sample included 420 students. Participants (those involved in eight or more activities) and non-participants (those involved in none) were compared. Analysis of the data revealed academic achievement in required courses related positively to participation in cocurricular activities. Other areas, such as self-esteem, self-concept, and socialization, were also positively affected by participation in cocurricular activities (Biernat and Klesse, 1989). These other areas are as significant as improvement of academic achievement because low self-esteem and antisocial behavior are key elements in the profile of the at-risk student. The development of desirable social attitudes on the part of individuals and groups represents a basic principle of student activity programs. Cooperation and understanding among social, racial, and ethnic groups in the student body are other understandings gained from participating in student activity programs.

The "community model" of the school is missed by the disengaged student. This model uses an extended family atmosphere where achievement and caring are important. It builds a sense of belonging, high self-esteem, and achievement. This model is at work on high school athletic teams, clubs, band, and other school organizations. These groups work hard to cultivate this community spirit and group cohesion (Cuban, 1989).

According to Wheelock (1986), the at-risk student is on a merry-go-round of negative experiences. Student activities may be just the place where the student can bond to the school and its mission. Adapting Wheelock's model, we place student activities between negative school experiences and the ultimate negative consequence of being at-risk—student disengagement and alienation. (See Figure 3.)

FIGURE 3.

Adaptation of The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round


SCHOOL FAILURE
AND LOW TEACHER EXPECTATIONS
"I must be too stupid to learn."
REPEATING A GRADE
"I can't do what other kids can do."
POOR ATTENDANCE
"School is not for me."
REPEATING A GRADE
"The school has given up on me."
IN-SCHOOL TRUANCY (CUTTING CLASSES, DISRUPTION)
"Teacher's rules are unfair."
OUT OF SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS
"I don't belong in school."
STUDENT ACTIVITIES
STUDENT BECOMES ENGAGED AND HAS A SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE SCHOOL AND ITS MISSION
OPPORTUNITIES TO BOND

4 Activity Advisers—Change Agents

There is a window of opportunity open to teachers and principals who can still gather their courage, wits, and energy to improve the lives of at-risk students. But the work must be accomplished by teachers and administrators. We cannot look to policies, regulations, and slogans to do the job (Cuban, 1989).

"How I Faded Away" by Janice May Udry is a story that describes a student who felt invisible to his school (Udry, 1986). It is a poignant tale of how the school minimizes the student who never has the chance to excel in anything, to the point where that student becomes invisible. Instead of recognizing whatever unique talents the student has, all that is noticed is the way the student differs from others. Robbie, the main character, is traced from the beginning of elementary school where we see the process of his becoming invisible. He never wanted to go to the blackboard, or be a helper, or play games because others always noticed the mistakes he made, and how he wasn't as good as the others. It is interesting that as soon as he leaves school he is visible again to his friends and family.

The only time he is visible in school is when he cries. As soon as the tears stop, he disappears again. He discovers one day that he is quite good at playing the recorder. He played at school and everyone noticed him. All of a sudden Robbie was visible. He was recognized for doing something positive.

The lesson to be applied to at-risk students is this: Crying brought Robbie attention. Negative behaviors bring attention to the at-risk student. Only then does the student receive recognition. Just as Robbie discovered his talent for playing the recorder, at-risk students must be encouraged to discover their unique talents or abilities.

In an informal survey conducted in the spring of 1992, at Oneonta College of the State University of New York, counselor education students at the graduate level were asked to identify a population of students they felt were alienated from their school. An alienated student was defined as one not participating in any club or organization. In addition, the graduate students were asked to describe efforts that should be made to help involve alienated students within their school. Many of the respondents felt that active recruitment by school personnel was needed for these students to become involved. One respondent summed it up this way, "We have several of these students in school. They feel schooling is for someone else. They feel they know nothing, aren't good at anything, and are just waiting to get out. Efforts should be made to involve the entire faculty or at least adviser/advisee groups. Each student should be known by his or her first name. These small groups could develop an identity of their own, somewhere to belong. In this atmosphere, each student would know that others know them and care what happens. They would then be recognized for their ideas and accomplishments."

In *Reclaiming Youth At-Risk: Our Hope for the Future*, the isolating effects of the unfriendly school are described (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and VanBockern, 1990). Drawing upon lessons from our Native American cultures, empowerment of at-risk youth is seen as possible. Native American philosophies of child management represent what is perhaps the most effective system of positive discipline ever developed. These approaches emerged from cultures where the central purpose of life was the education and empowerment of children. Modern child development research is only now reaching the point where this holistic approach can be understood, validated, and replicated. This approach offers four central values that can help reclaim at-risk youth:

1. The Spirit of Belonging
2. The Spirit of Mastery
3. The Spirit of Independence
4. The Spirit of Generosity.

Student activities can build upon these values to provide at-risk students with an environment conducive for a journey into empowerment and active participation within their school. Here is how it can be done:

VALUE 1.

Spirit of Belonging—nurturing within a larger circle of significant others, a network of caring adults.

At-Risk Student	*Student Activities*	*Outcome*
Thirsts for nurturing, has a strong need to belong.	Provides a safe place to belong, a circle of significant others, a caring adult.	Learns acceptance, satisfies one of Glasser's basic needs—the need to belong.

VALUE 2.

Spirit of Mastery—youth strive for mastery of their environment, the need to feel competent.

At-Risk Student	*Student Activities*	*Outcome*
Usually has poor academic performance, little control over his or her environment at home or school.	Involvement in activities allows the at-risk student to develop a sense of control; he or she takes part in the decision-making process. Research supports that a byproduct of the involvement in cocurricular activities is a higher GPA.	Greater decision-making ability. Increased confidence in the expression of an ideal. Higher GPA will give the at-risk student a sense of mastery.

VALUE 3.

Spirit of Independence—Traditional Native American cultures placed a high value on individual freedom. In place of rewards and punishments, adults used modeling, group influence, discussion, and positive expectations.

At-Risk Student	*Student Activities*	*Outcome*
Accustomed to punishment as a consequence for his or her negative behavior. Usually lack positive adult role models, highly influenced by peer pressure, need a sense of identity.	Provides a safe place for role modeling of successful students, learns how to be positively influenced by a group, has a forum for discussion and positive decision making.	Greater sense of what their values are, places a higher value on individual freedom, less likely to blindly succumb to peer pressure.

VALUE 4.

Spirit of Generosity —values of simplicity, generosity, and nonmaterialism are taught.

At-Risk Student	*Student Activities*	*Outcome*
Often self-centered, strive for materialistic means to establish identity—pop culture, trends, drugs.	Provides a vehicle for caring for others through service projects, volunteerism, and teamwork.	Focus is off self and on to others. Research shows a higher sense of self-worth as one becomes committed to the positive value of caring for others.

Clearly there are benefits that all students can gain from participation in student activities!

Student activities may have an even greater value for the at-risk student as it becomes the bridge that helps a student cross over from feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and low self-worth to feelings of high self-esteem, and belonging.

Why do at-risk students show little interest in student activities? Recalling the study of the Hutters and the jocks in Chapter 2, the Hutters feel separated from the school and the successful students (Barr, 1987). This separation is a result of a perceived sense that the school does not care. Alienation from the school is translated into alienation from *whatever* and *whoever* is involved with the school. Thus, the separation between the at-risk student and student activities which typically involve the pro-school, successful student. According to Hamby (1989), people usually avoid situations in which they feel physically or emotionally threatened. At-risk students generally find school a threatening place. It is essential, then, that at least part of the school be seen as secure and nonthreatening. To engage students in activities is to help them dismantle their idea of school as threatening.

According to Beacham's list of reasons for non-participation in student activities (Chart 2), non-interest is listed most frequently (Self, 1985). Non-interest means that the student feels there is nothing to gain from participating. This lack of interest prevents the student from reaping the rewards that the successful student reaps from participation. As stated in "This We Believe," student activities help individuals develop talent, maturity, and responsibility

(Biernat and Klesse, 1989). The accomplishments of adults are significantly correlated to their non-academic experiences as students in school. Thus, student activities are of extraordinary importance to adulthood (Biernat and Klesse, 1989). The rewards of talent development, maturity, and responsibility must also be accessible to the at-risk student.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents were either not interested, had to work after school, or had transportation problems (Self, 1985).

Suggestions for making student activities more accessible to the at-risk student can be grouped into three basic areas: activities, advisers, and participants:

Activities—According to "The Mood of American Youth," students participate in these activities (Biernat and Klesse, 1989):

- athletic teams/clubs
- band/orchestra
- choir/choral groups
- career-oriented clubs
- language clubs
- drama/theater
- pep club
- school publications
- student council
- government
- service/volunteer groups
- National Honor Society
- other honorary societies
- debate/speech
- cheerleading
- science clubs.

Research has shown that it is most likely the academically talented, the athlete, and the popular student who make up the membership of many clubs. There must be an effort, however, to have a more diverse population involved in student activities. Clubs such as drama/theater and school publications historically have involved many "nontraditional" students due to a need for individual talent in many diverse areas.

Instead of being part of the at-risk problem, activity participants must be part of the solution. More specifically, student leaders should be targeted as an important resource in building this bridge. Student leaders are generally involved in a wide variety of cocurricular activities. With leadership training, provided in a leadership class or at a summer leadership camp, student leaders will understand that leadership goes beyond acquiring personal skills. Leadership is being a problem solver, a risk taker, a willing worker in

addressing problems larger than oneself. Student leaders can have a crucial and unique role in student activities as a solution to the at-risk problem. "I believe that each student should have the right to be involved, to participate in the life of the school, to be heard, and to be able to listen and learn" (Reum, 1987). Peer leadership is powerful. Teamwork is more powerful yet.

Some clubs have criteria that make participation difficult for many interested students. Athletics, student council, and cheerleading are examples. The formula for participation often seems to be: good grades = activity participation. How about a new formula? Activity participation = good or improving grades.

This idea is supported by a study done by Slotz that looked at athletic participation and student grades (Biernat and Klesse, 1989). Slotz found that students failed proportionately fewer times when actively competing than during the off season. In short, participation in sports was found to positively affect student grades. Why not allow participation and determine continued participation by grade improvement rather than a set GPA? Can all students participate on a squad who are interested in doing so? Does there always have to be a cut? Do all cheerleaders need a uniform? Can we offer a wider variety of student activities?

It is possible to open up student activities to include the at-risk student!

Advisers must be willing to take on greater responsibility for the inclusion of the at-risk student. Research strongly supports the idea that one adult can make a difference. One connection with the school in a positive way can keep a student "hanging in there." One relationship can open the door for better relationships with others in the school. Activity advisers must coordinate with the school administration to include in their mission statement goals for reaching at-risk students. Training, formally reserved for counselors and other student support staff, should be made accessible for the student activity adviser. Such training should focus on communication skills, problem-solving skills, group process, cooperative learning, and individual learning styles. Not only is a bridge needed between the at-risk student and the school, but a bridge is needed between the at-risk student and the successful student.

CHART 2.

Reasons for Non-Participation in Cocurricular Activities

In order from most frequently given reason to the least frequently given reason:

1. Not interested
2. Have to work after school
3. Transportation problems
4. Could not participate in the area of my choice
5. Cannot pay the required fees
6. Others
   a. cocurricular activities were not available at my school
   b. medical problems
   c. already active in community recreation programs.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents were either not interested, had to work after school, or had transportation problems.

(Self, 1985)

5 Tips for Involving At-Risk Students

Tips for Student Advisers

- Request inservice training in areas such as problem solving, decision making, group process, and learning styles. Workshops are available outside the school, or in some cases may be brought to the school.
- Support must come from the top—present goals to the administration for including at-risk students. Develop mission statements to be passed out to students and parents. (Top-down support for bottom-up planning.)
- Be willing to get more involved on a personal level. You may be just the adult with whom an at-risk student connects.
- Publicize your group—openly address the changes that you are trying to institute. At-risk students need to be aware of the changes being made.
- Recruit—find a student or students you feel have the talent or ability to contribute to your group. Go after that student, sell your activity. Use anticipation statements such as, "Hope to see you next Tuesday." Or, "Next Tuesday you can be in charge of painting the signs."
- Don't take rejection personally. The at-risk student is impersonally rejecting the school, not you. Remembering this will help you be less defensive. Try again!
- Select role models in your group who are willing to "buddy up" with an at-risk student and provide peer support.
- Be in close contact with a school counselor. Consult with the counselor, go over problems, keep informal track of attendance and academic progress.

- Use community resources to the fullest. Bring people to school, take students on field trips, help make the school-to-life connections. Have a guest for lunch. Sponsor a community open forum to discuss problems and to determine how students can help.
- Get student input. Students usually have the most creative ideas to solve problems.
- Survey all the students. Find out what their needs are and what it would take to get them involved.
- Take your responsibility as adviser beyond the realm of the activity or club you are advising. Look at all students as potential members. Take time out to talk with students in the hall, eat lunch with a group of students, show you care.
- Attend an adviser workshop or leadership program at the state or national level.
- Advocate for having student activities be a part of the students' four-year academic plan. This idea could be expanded as far as requiring activity involvement at each grade level.
- At-risk students need role models who are involved. Knowing adults who are active in serving others has a positive influence. Show them the value of service. Invite the at-risk student to join you.

Tips for Improving Activities

- Offer rap sessions where students can get together to talk. Involve a student leader as a role model as well as a school counselor.
- Provide resource people for topics such as:
  - Problem Solving
  - Money Management
  - Leisure Time Management
  - Organizational Skills
  - Interpersonal Skill Development
  - Family Living
  - Stress Management
  - Lifelong Learning
  - Citizenship
- Schedule more activities for the weekends. Find an incentive to offer to students for participation.
- Develop peer leadership programs. Offer training at times during regularly scheduled periods so that all students can participate. Make this a portion of the social studies or English curriculum. At-risk students need to be involved.

- Set up an in-school and/or after-school tutoring program using at-risk students as tutors. Tutor high school, middle school, and elementary students.
- Provide college-sponsored programs for exposure to higher education. At-risk students lack this exposure. Higher education is seen as a "foreign land" to many at-risk students.
- Research shows that youth who serve others are less likely to be involved in at-risk behavior. The school should take on at least one community project a year and invite students to participate on a variety of levels.
- Make sure your student council representatives represent the whole student body. Have faculty advisers involved in the selection, possibly sending out a questionnaire and asking which students would be interested if it weren't a matter of popularity. Open representation to more students by appointing "at large" members.
- Involve at-risk students in athletics by having them videotape games and practices.
- Institute a no-cut policy on some or more athletic teams—especially at the middle school level.
- Encourage athletic involvement by having students form their own teams to play against faculty teams or each other during lunch hour or after school. Students gain valuable experience from playing on a team and learn decision-making and leadership skills.
- Promote ideas that involve students in the ownership of the school. Paint murals, involve students in school landscaping, display student sculptures and other artwork.
- Put the at-risk students in a role modeling position. Assign them as big brothers and sisters to younger students.
- Have an activity period during the day, possibly the last period when all students in the building can be involved in an activity such as yearbook, photography, tutoring, nature club, and student council.
- Emphasize career-oriented programs for the non-college-bound student. Start an apprenticeship program with local business/industry assistance.
- Organize a several day or week-long program for at-risk students.

(Band together with other area activity advisers or work through your statewide organization.) Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and some camps have "challenge" programs that can be used. Contact your local college or university for assistance. Check with local community service organizations and churches.

- Start a staff showcase. Display information and pictures about each staff member. Use students to gather the information and pictures and to keep the showcase current.
- Start a leadership class. Teach leadership skills to *all* students. Contact your state student council organization or the Division of Student Activities at NASSP for assistance.
- Involve students in orientation programs at the start of the school year and as new students arrive during the school year.
- Have Mock Elections and use students to run the elections.
- Plan a fun afternoon—schedule an "Olympics" with non-traditional events. Use students to organize and operate the events.
- Have an activities night/dance that can involve many students who might not attend just a dance. Offer incentives for attendance.
- Take up a cause—food bank, clothing drive, Habitat for Humanity, ecology—and have students compete by grade for the most service provided.
- Start a school store for students to organize and run.
- Have Special Days—Slogan Day, Dress-Up Day, Grandparent Day. Turn these days into contests!
- Plan activities that involve many clubs—arts, music, etc., working together.
- Start a student activities newsletter. Involve more students with its production and let others know what is happening.
- Recognize more students through student of the month or week and focus on achivement or improvement in an area or at a grade level.
- If your school has a homeroom period, use it. Set up competitions by homeroom and activities that invqlve all students.
- Start a teacher appreciation program. Welcome teachers back to school, provide room helpers, have a staff breakfast or picnic, do holiday programs, recognize birthdays.

- Have club officers make presentations to homerooms about their club and invite others to join.
- Have students write autobiographies highlighting family attitude toward school, hobbies, strong and weak points. Teachers can "direct" students to appropriate students activities in a private and nonthreatening manner and also alert the activity adviser.
- At the start of the school year use ice breakers and get-acquainted activities in classes to make students more comfortable with each other.
- Have student recognition assemblies. Recognize academics, drama, speech, DECA, VICA involvement and achievement.
- Sponsor class competitions to include all types of students.
- Sponsor noontime activities and entertainment so that students who work can be involved.
- Hold "Open Forum" meetings of the student council. Stress the need for representation of all students.
- Announce "open invitations" to activities and make personal invitations to decorate, build, or serve.
- Hold Olympic competitions (no skill necessary) with teams formed by students or by "academic area." (The freshman team, for example, must have one technology student, one drama student, etc.)
- Research all peer groups to find a "positive" on which to generate interest in an activity.
- Hold Academic Bowls/Trivia Bowls in a wide range of student interests—such as auto mechanics, science, technology, music, and other cultures.
- Sponsor Cultural Awareness Events with music, food, and dance.
- Hold a talent show. Request participation of individuals who would be reluctant.
- Require community service of all students as a graduation requirement.
- Use senior citizen volunteers to involve more students, especially at-risk students.
- Use "how to" or demonstration speeches in English classes to discover hobbies, interests, and aptitudes that would relate to particular student activities.

- Encourage students to share themselves and their ability in an activity.
- Bring in a motivational speaker who has a success story to share.
- Promote scholarship programs such as Horatio Alger.
- Start a Big Sister/Big Brother program.
- Attend a NAWD (National Association of Workship Directors) or NASC (National Association of Students Councils) Convention.

Principles of Good Practice When Planning Your Program

- *Engage in responsible and sustained actions for the common good.* Though many groups participate in one-time projects or work camps, these isolated efforts are less effective as vehicles for learning and contributing to society. Effective service-learning projects engage in important, ongoing work so that positive, lasting change is possible.
- *Provide structured opportunities to reflect critically on their service experience.* The service experience alone does not ensure that higher significant learning or effective service will occur. It is important that programs build in structured opportunities for participants to think about their experience and what they are doing.
- *Articulate clear service and learning goals.* Both participants and recipients need to have a clear understanding of what will be accomplished and what will be gained.
- *Allow for those in need to define needs.* This principle guards against resentment among residents when projects take away jobs from the local community or do things that are not seen as useful. Involving community leaders, agencies, and individuals in the planning process ensures that the project is indeed appropriate for the local community.
- *Clarify responsibilities.* Each person and each organization should have clearly defined roles. These could include students, teachers, volunteers, community leaders, sponsoring organizations, and people and organizations receiving service.

- *Recognize changing circumstances in matching service providers and service needs.* Effective service-learning begins by carefully matching service providers with service needs. Furthermore, since the service experience often changes people's values, projects need continual feedback and evaluation as relationships and perspectives change.
- *Expect genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.* Projects inevitably fizzle out when organizations no longer consider them important. Thus, sponsoring and receiving organizations must make a strong, lasting commitment to the service-learning goals for the process to be effective.
- *Include training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.* Each of these activities supports and nourishes those who serve by giving them the skills they need to grow in their work and by recognizing that they are making an important contribution.
- *Ensure that the time commitment is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interest of all involved.* If projects demand more time than is practical in the busy world of youth, the effort is likely to be abandoned. If too little is demanded, the service may become trivial.
- *Commit to program participation by and with diverse populations.* All young people can serve, and all young people can benefit from serving others. Efforts should be made to break down barriers that prevent people from serving and making a difference in the world (Benson and Roehlkepartain, 1991).

Tips for Participants

- All students must be educated in a broader philosophy of student activities. "Each student has a right to be involved and can be involved."
- Solicit ideas from all students about how to make this vision a reality.
- Select student leaders who are mature and responsible to be a core group used to encourage the at-risk student. To set an example, student leaders should participate in a wide variety of activities outside their comfortable range.

- Train student leaders in the same skills as activity advisers:
  - communication skills
  - team building teamwork
  - problem-solving skills
  - group process.
- Pair student leaders with an at-risk student in a particular activity. This will take skill on the part of the person doing the pairing and maturity on the part of the student leader and at-risk student.
- Involve at-risk handicapped students in your activities and broaden your student base even more. Take a risk! If you miss the mark, trip and fall—you will be falling *forward!*

Closing Thought

Student activity involvement develops leaders!

Traditionally we used the following equation and planned accordingly:

PAST × PRESENT = FUTURE

However, the above equation can be modified as follows:

PAST × FUTURE = PRESENT

Leaders need to use our knowledge of the past and our understanding of the future to plan for the present. What will we do now to develop better leaders for the future?

Leadership is innovation, solving problems with workable simple solutions, looking at problems with an understanding of the future and the past and acting for the present (Klesse, 1990).

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